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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI  
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INFO RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0776  
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 3966  
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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2457  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 4635  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 8757  
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 7196  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2876  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 2249  
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 2095  
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 2713  
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 2211  
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 1325  
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR 2892  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
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RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RHHJJPI/PACOM IDHS HONOLULU HI  
RHMFISS/HQ USSOCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NEW DELHI 001632

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STATE FOR P, S/CT AND SCA  
DNI FOR DIRECTOR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/07/2016  
TAGS: [PTER](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [PREL](#) [IN](#) [PK](#)  
SUBJECT: JIHADIS PRIME SUSPECTS IN VARANASI BLASTS;  
TERRORISTS FAIL TO ELICIT BACKLASH

REF: A. NEW DELHI 1611

- [1](#)B. NEW DELHI 161
- [1](#)C. 05 NEW DELHI 8436
- [1](#)D. 05 NEW DELHI 5165
- [1](#)E. 05 NEW DELHI 4449

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Classified By: Charge Bob Blake for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: A March 7 evening terrorist bomb attack at one of three main Hindu temples in the holy city of Varanasi, followed by a second blast at the city's train station, put the country on high alert, but has not yet incited a major communal backlash, which terrorist analysts say was the underlying goal of the attacks. This theory is further buttressed by the timing, just one week before the Hindu festival of Holi, when communal tensions often run high, and the method and time of day of the attack, which echo in many respects the October 2005 Diwali blasts in Delhi. No terrorist group has yet claimed responsibility for the attacks, but early and informed speculation is that one of the major jihadi outfits is behind it. Police officials on the morning of March 8 put the casualty count from the two explosions at 15 dead and 80-85 injured (these numbers are expected to rise), higher than the July 2005 attack on the Ayodhya temple complex, or the May 2005 cinema blasts, which

are also viewed as having been aimed at sparking a violent communal response. Reflecting deep GOI concerns about a possible communal backlash, Congress President Sonia Gandhi rushed to Varanasi the day of the blasts. With passions running high there is no guarantee that communal harmony will continue to prevail, especially in the troubled state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) (septel). We recommend the Department issue a statement of condolences and a call to offer condolences and assistance with the investigation from DNI Negroponte to Indian NSA Narayanan. Post EAC met on March 8 and recommended a Warden Message, a draft of which has been sent to CA. End Summary.

#### Blasts Rock Holy City

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¶2. (C) Police confirmed that at approximately 6:15 pm on March 7, a bomb blast ripped through the "packed to capacity" 400-year-old Sankat Mochan Temple, one of the three most important shrines in the Indian holy city of Varanasi (Benares). The temple, dedicated to the monkey god Hanuman, was filled with thousands of worshippers at the time; Tuesday and Saturdays are the primary prayer days, and several weddings were also being performed. Approximately 20 minutes later terrorists detonated one more bomb at the Varanasi cantonment railway station. Contrary to media reports, police denied a second bomb at the railway station. Police report that there are no foreign casualties identified among the 15 dead and over 60 wounded. (More recent reports place the number dead at over twenty, with still no foreign casualties reported.) Indian media described some of the injured as critical, suggesting the death count may rise further in the next few days.

¶3. (C) Indian newspapers reported that police recovered

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several additional, live bombs in Varanasi that same evening. The explosives were planted in public locations and were rigged for timed detonation according to "Times of India," "Hindustan Times," and "Asian Age" correspondents. We have police confirmation of two additional bombs, at a market and a restaurant, both of which were defused by the police bomb squad.

¶4. (C) No terrorist group has publicly taken responsibility for the attacks; this is common in India. Forensic reports of the bomb sites are not yet available, and rapid clean-up efforts may preclude a serious blast investigation. However, because the primary target was a Hindu temple and the timing coincides with the run-up to the Holi spring festival, Indian media and terrorism experts believe a jihadi terrorist group was behind the attacks, with media reports suggesting either Lashkar-e-Tayyiba or Jaish-e-Mohammad carried out the bombings, with emphasis on LeT due to the organization's size, sophistication, and reach beyond Kashmir into mainland India.

Cities on High Alert; Reports that LeT Militants Killed in Delhi and Lucknow

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¶5. (U) As of March 8, all major Indian cities are on high alert and the police presence at religious sites and trains and railway platforms is also being increased.

¶6. (C) Television channels and wires are reporting that three suspected LeT terrorists were shot in police "encounters" in Delhi and Lucknow. There is no completely reliable reporting as of yet indicating whether these individuals were connected to the Varanasi bombings or any other planned attacks. Two of the suspected militants were supposedly shot by the Special Cell of Delhi police, early on the morning of March 8. Police identify one of the militants as Ghulam Yazdani (another, unattributed report, identifies

him as Mohammed Yazdani -- a Bangladeshi national). Both men were wanted in several terrorist attacks in Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh, according to press. Delhi police claim to have recovered a large arms cache from Yazdani. "They had come to Delhi to carry out explosions and attacks at public places; we are investigating their motive," said Karnail Singh, Joint Commissioner, Special Cell. The suspect slain in Lucknow is a suspected LeT militant, identified as Salaar alias Salim. Police are associating him with the Varanasi bombings. According to police, he is an expert in carrying out bombings and was wanted in connection with several bomb blasts in Jammu and Kashmir.

#### Echoes Diwali, Ayodhya Attacks

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¶7. (C) The Varanasi bombings echo last year's Diwali and Ayodhya attacks -- Home Secretary VK Duggal explicitly linked the two in a press conference. The Varanasi and Diwali attacks were launched just prior to a Hindu festival -- the Diwali bombings targeted markets where people were buying

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gifts and new clothes to usher in the holiday. The method of attack -- multiple bombs in crowded places, timed to detonate serially within a span of less than a half hour in the early evening -- is also similar. Linking Ayodhya and Varanasi (and also harking back to the 2002 attack on the Ashkhadam Temple, in Gujarat) is the targeting of important Hindu temples. All appear to have been designed to maximize communal tensions and spark a Hindu backlash.

#### Indian Muslim Leaders Denounce Bombings

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¶8. (U) Indian Muslim leaders are publicly denouncing the bombings. Mahmood Madani, General Secretary of the pro-Congress Jamiat-Ulema-i-Hind, expressed condolences on behalf of his party and called the attack "a shameful incident," "any violence in a place of worship is condemnable." Maulana Fuzail Ahmed, General Secretary of Markazi (central) Jamiat-Ulema-i-Hind expressed similar condolences and condemnation. Dr. Tasleem Rahmani, President of the Muslim Political Council of India said that a conspiracy was in the making for some time in the unstable political atmosphere of UP to "communally inflame the atmosphere of the state." Dr. Rahmani expressed sympathy for the injured and the innocent victims of the blast, and called for the perpetrators of the crime to be brought to justice." General Secretary of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board Maulana Syed Nizamuddin also condemned the attacks and distanced mainstream Muslims from the incident, saying "This has nothing to do with religion." Kashmiri separatists across the political spectrum, from Hurriyat leader Mirwaiz Umar Farooq to pro-Pakistan hardliner SAS Geelani, similarly spoke out publicly against the attacks on civilians.

#### Keeping a Lid on Communalism, For Now

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¶9. (SBU) Shortly after the blasts, both President Kalam and PM Singh urged Indians to remain calm and resist rising to "break the communal peace." Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi flew to Varanasi the same night, reflecting the political sensitivities in Uttar Pradesh (Septel). Although the Cabinet met shortly after the attacks, the GOI has so far not issued any public statement on the bombings, aside from security advisories. In a possible bid to divert attention from the communal aspect of this attack, Varanasi Police Chief Navenet Sikera said the bombings could be in retaliation for the arrest of an LeT militant last month.

¶10. (SBU) The Hindu nationalist Vishwa Hindua Parishad (VHP) General Secretary Praveen Togadia announced a bandh (strike) in Varanasi, describing the bomb blasts as "Jehadi terrorism" and "war against the Indian nation." By 12:30 pm Wednesday,

March 8, a peaceful, 300-person demonstration sponsored by the VHP had already commenced in New Delhi. Contacts in the UP capital of Lucknow report that the city is shut down in response to the strike call. BJP parliamentary leader Advani likewise has blamed the Congress government for creating an atmosphere "where fundamentalism is getting space to be nurtured."

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Comment: Restraint Currently Prevails  
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¶11. (C) The real target of the Varanasi bombings was neither the temple nor the worshippers, as much as it was the fabric of Indian communal relations. It is a testament to the general tolerance of India's Hindu community that restraint so far prevails. As with the October 2005 Diwali blasts -- and with the May 2005 cinema bombings carried out by Sikh terrorists -- the terrorists behind the attacks may overestimate their ability to incite communal violence.

¶12. (C) But restraint among the Indian populace and its leaders is being tested, as is restraint within the GOI, which has resisted pointing the finger at Islamabad for the other spectacular incidents of cross-border terrorism over the past year (Ref A). This is especially true in UP, which has been rocked by several communal riots since October and where rioting in Lucknow on March 3 resulted in four deaths. Even if we do not know the limit of India's restraint, we do know it is not limitless.

Action Recommendation: Building Intel/CT Links  
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¶13. (C) This tragedy offers the opportunity to strengthen our CT bonds and further USG outreach to the GOI on intelligence sharing (Ref B). Post recommends Secretary Rice issue a statement of condolences and that DNI Negroponte call Indian NSA MK Narayanan to offer condolences and ask if there is any way the USG can help the Indian investigation.

(U) Visit New Delhi's Classified Website:  
(<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/sa/newdelhi/>)  
BLAKE